

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE

This 2035 Regional Transit Element updates the 2030 document and will become a part of the 2035 North Front Range Regional Transportation Plan Update to be completed in 2011. The purpose of the Regional Transit Element is to guide development of the transit mode in the region which encompasses the Fort Collins Transportation Management Area (TMA) and Greeley urbanized areas.

In the previous planning work (2030 Regional Transit Element) a vision for regional transit services was defined, along with a framework that provided an understanding of the types of regional transit services that may be needed to connect the cities and towns in the region to each other. Since that time, the North I-25 Environmental Impact Statement has been prepared, providing a clear definition of how the transit mode will be integrated with the roadway mode, addressing transit service needs on the major roadways in the region.

The 2035 Transit Element builds on this work and shifts the emphasis to the implementation of regional transit services, focusing on the steps necessary to translate a long-term regional vision into reality. It provides alternatives ranging from maintaining the status quo to rapid movement towards the types of services envisioned in the North I-25 Environmental Impact Statement. This planning effort reflects a slightly different approach and contains a more detailed level of analysis than has been done in the past. The draft Report on Alternatives for the 2035 Regional Transit Element:

- Defines service levels that are typically used in moving from no service in a corridor to a well-developed transit mode and illustrates the potential for service development in the primary corridors in the region.
- Identifies the challenging questions about funding and governance that need to be answered in order to move forward in implementing services. Notably the document does not answer these questions. To do so will require a wide range of stakeholders working together to define roles, responsibilities, and funding options. The document suggests strategies to use in addressing the issues.
- Provides factual information on what it will take to provide regional transit, at various levels of service. This information makes it easier to see what can be accomplished and that the development of regional services is manageable.
- Provides strategies and tools for developing regional transit services.

PROJECT GUIDANCE

The development of the 2035 Regional Transit Element is occurring under the auspices of the North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization (NFRMPO). The Planning Council is guiding the development of the report and will adopt it as part of the regional planning process.

A technical steering committee has been assembled and includes members of the MPO Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), Transit Advisory Group (TAG), Planning Council members, the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), and Denver's Regional Transportation District (RTD). All members are listed in Appendix A. The responsibilities of the steering committee are to review work products from a technical and practical perspective, provide information about plans and activities occurring in their individual areas and discuss and comment on issues and the work presented by the consultant.

In initiating this planning effort, both the Planning Council of the NFRMPO and the project Steering Committee provided important guidance. Key concepts included:

- Addressing how to connect communities in the region with each other and with activity centers outside the region
- Practical results
- Strong public involvement

The 2035 Regional Transit Element is built upon local planning efforts and other planning studies in the region. Appendix B contains a summary of relevant planning reports.

This study considers local transit plans but does not address local transit services. All decisions about local levels of transit service remain with local entities. The regional services addressed in this plan are general public fixed route services.

STUDY PROCESS

The development of the 2035 Regional Transit Element has proceeded in two major phases. Phase one covers documentation of regional characteristics and the existing and planned transit services, analysis of demand for the transit mode, and the development of alternatives for developing regional transit services.

The planning activities leading through the evaluation of alternatives have included public involvement, beginning with soliciting comments from the Mobility Councils and residents in Larimer and Weld counties. The public involvement will continue with public meetings in each county to solicit comments on this Draft Regional Transit Element Report on Alternatives. In addition, it includes a series

of meetings with the jurisdictions in the region to solicit their views on the alternatives for developing regional transit services.

All comments received on this draft report will be incorporated and the report submitted to the Planning Council. Once the Council provides direction on a “preferred alternative” or set of initial actions, a detailed implementation plan will be prepared. The complete Regional Transit Element will be presented to the Planning Council. Once adopted, the RTE will become one of the foundation documents for the development of the North Front Range 2035 Regional Transportation Plan Update, scheduled for 2011.

STUDY ISSUES

In the North Front Range, transit services have developed through local governments to primarily meet the local travel needs of their residents. As the region has grown there has been an increasing need for transit services between communities and to major activity and employment centers.

The region is growing rapidly, and is projected to nearly double its population to 729,000 by 2035. Much of the future development in the region is anticipated to occur in the center of the region and in unincorporated areas where transit services may not exist or are not as well developed as in the urbanized areas.

The region’s rapid development also taxes the roadway network. Travel forecasts project levels of congestion in the region that will require significant investment in the transportation infrastructure for all modes. This raises the issue of the role that transit will serve in the future regional transportation network. Transit services can be effective options during peak travel times, especially when there is a network of feeder services into regional corridors.

What transit services are needed in the future? How will they be delivered? How will they be paid for? A significant amount of planning work has gone into addressing the question of what services are needed within and between individual communities. The preferred alternative developed in the North I-25 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) includes significant regional transit services. The outstanding issues revolve around how the services will be developed, funded, and delivered.

There are several challenges to answering these questions. One issue is that there is not a common vision for the role and function of transit services in the region. Cities with local transit services in Larimer County are actively developing regional transit services with the pilot FLEX route, extending services in the State Highway 287 corridor south to Longmont, and developing bus rapid transit for the Mason Corridor. At the same time, the City of Greeley has considered reductions to its transit services due to funding constraints.

This same issue surfaces at the State level where the role of the State in the funding and delivery of regional transit and rail services is being developed.

Financing of transit services is a perennial challenge, and the development of regional transit services will require stable funding. At present each community is responsible for determining how they will fund local transit services and any connections to other communities. Just as financing transit services is an issue for local jurisdictions, the State faces the same issue for the services identified in the North I-25 EIS.

While it is widely recognized that regional transit services will be important to northern Colorado, a plan does not exist for developing such services. There are two different approaches. One is to extend out from existing services. The other is to establish new routes in corridors where conditions seem conducive to establishing transit services. Pilot route services have been started, but permanent financing for successful services are needed.

Recognizing the above issues and challenges, this Regional Transit Element Update will focus on the practicalities of identifying how to move forward in the development of transit services for the region.

REVIEWING THE ALTERNATIVES REPORT

As noted in the beginning of this chapter, this planning effort provides a pathway to enable the North Front Range to develop regional transit services. Regional transit services are defined as regularly scheduled fixed route services connecting the communities of the North Front Range with each other and with the Denver/Boulder metropolitan area.

The work completed to date clarifies the issues and provides strategies and tools for addressing the issues. It points out how inter-connected the development of transit services in the North Front Range will be with the State's development of its role and responsibilities in providing regional transit services across Colorado.

Key questions to consider in reviewing this Regional Transit Element Report on Alternatives include:

- Which alternative best matches your values in describing the importance of regional transit and the speed with which it should be developed?
- Are the issues accurately defined and reflective of the range of concerns that surround the development of regional transit services?
- What are your priorities for the development of regional transit services?

All comments will be considered in preparing the final Regional Transit Element.